



ISLAMIC INFLUENCE ON WOODCARVING MOTIFS IN JOHOR TRADITIONAL MALAY HOUSES

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ABSTRACT

Woodcarving motifs can be influenced by various aspects, including religions and beliefs. Malaysia is known for its cultural diversity and is rich with traditional heritage. Malay is one of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia and is considered as the majority of the country's population, contributing to the significant heritage, including art, decoration, and even architecture. Traditional woodcarving is an intricate Malay heritage and is the symbol of Malay art. A study on Malay woodcarvings is critically needed in order to know the influence that occurs on the selection of the motifs. It is such a waste to see our woodcarving heritage destroyed unappreciated and undocumented, especially on Johor woodcarvings, as many studies in other states have done. More and more traditional Johor Malay houses are being demolished day by day before we know the historical influence on the existence. The objective of this paper was to identify the woodcarving motifs found in Johor Malay houses and to identify their influence. Site visits were conducted in which the woodcarvings of 50 houses were examined, photographed, and documented. Interviews were also conducted with the house owners and the woodcarvers. The samples were analyzed, and the results were verified by experts. The results show that floral motifs lead the statistic, and the pumpkin motif, known as 'labu maya', takes the highest percentage of the overall motifs. It is concluded that the Islamic religion is the biggest influence that contributes to the findings. The findings also show that the 'labu maya' motif is the identity of the Johor woodcarving motifs. It is hoped that this study can bring recognition to Johor woodcarvings, and contribute valuable guides for woodcarvers to apply these motif typologies into their future works to sustain and cherish the Johor local identity.

KEYWORDS:

Wood Carving, Malay Woodcarving, Malay Woodcarving Motif, Islamic Motif, Johor Traditional House.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is one of the countries that possess various ethnics, has cultural diversity, and is rich with traditional heritage. Malay is one of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia and is considered as the majority of the country's population, which contributes to the significant heritage, including art, decoration, and even architecture. Traditional woodcarving is an intricate Malay heritage and is the symbol of Malay art. Woodcarving was created and designed to provide convenience and enhance the art of Malay culture [1]. Despite being an important element, woodcarving is on the brink of being disregarded due to opting for modern and more contemporary design. These practices pose a threat to the local identity and the historical value of the local heritage. Suppose such practices continue and the identity of the local heritage is not identified and recorded. In that case, the traditional designs and local identity left by the

local ancestors will eventually be lost. Therefore, the objective of this study was to identify the woodcarving motifs in Johor traditional houses and identify the category and their influences.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Traditional Malay houses are commonly decorated with woodcarvings that have beautiful motifs, placements, and design compositions. According to Noor Hanita *et al.* [2], woodcarving revealed the identity of Malay culture that has been assimilated into the traditional or vernacular buildings to add the aesthetic value to its architecture.

These woodcarvings represent the Malay culture and should be perceived, appreciated, and preserved. However, vast urbanization has created such a huge impact where the old houses were being renovated using modern elements and components due to the rapid development of architectural style and recent

technology [3][4][5] to keep up with the current trend. Hence, it is important to conduct research on woodcarvings found in the traditional Malay houses. Studies on woodcarving have been carried out in the vicinity of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and Melaka, while this research will cover Johor.

Issues and Problem Statement

One of the biggest issues that create a challenge in preserving this Malay heritage in Johor is the abandonment of traditional houses with woodcarving. It is such a waste to see our heritage of woodcarving being destroyed, unappreciated and undocumented. More and more traditional Malay houses are being demolished day by day, making it harder to explore the historical value. Study on motifs is very important as the motif may represent the identity of the woodcarving of a certain vicinity.

Through interviews, the issue of an identity crisis, as well as the influence, occurred because the Johor woodcarvers have not made any detailed study related to woodcarving motifs on Johor traditional houses that have existed for more than 100 years [6].

Influence on the Woodcarving Motifs

The woodcarving motif in Malay woodcarving in the Malay Archipelago came before the pre-Islamic era when they embraced Hinduism and Buddhism. The motifs found at that time were included *Kala Makara*, *Gunungan*, *Stupa*, *Garuda* and *Naga* [7].

With the arrival of Islam, these motifs were slowly reformed in accordance with the Islamic rules and regulations [8][9][10]. Most of the carvings representing motifs of Kala and Makara were transformed into floral elements. The transformations were also influenced by the craftsman's skill, natural elements, and of course the religious belief and thought [11].

The adaptations of different religions influenced the evolutions of woodcarvings in Malaysia. According to Perbadanan Kemajuan Kraftangan Malaysia [12], a series of influences started with Hinduism. Most of the woodcarvings were depicted by Hindu motifs and followed by the arrival of Langkasuka motifs, and from there, it evolved and transformed to Buddhism motifs after the arrival of the Chinese. It was then influenced by the colonial motifs when the westerners came and finally turned into 'Malay motif' derived from the strong Islamic influence.

Unlike the woodcarvings from the north-eastern state of Malaysia, which are known to have Langkasuka and Hindu influences, not much is known for Johor. As for Johor, it has not been investigated whether there are any Hinduism and Buddhism influence motifs found in their traditional houses or only Islamic influence motifs are found. It is also to investigate and identify the most outnumbered motif that may represent the identity of the Johor woodcarving motif.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a case study design, and the data collection methods involved field study and interviews. The research started with obtaining information about the traditional Malay houses that can be found throughout Johor. Next, site visits and inventory were conducted at 110 traditional Malay Johor houses. From there, 50 houses were then selected for the case study. Finally, the houses and woodcarvings were examined, observed, photographed, and documented.

These 50 Johor traditional Malay houses were chosen based on three criteria: their age, distinctive woodcarvings, and having woodcarvings in various significant placements. The houses must be over 50 years old. The houses were built as early as 1820. The woodcarvings should be authentic and built around the same age of the house and were not a reproduction or addition built during renovation.

The house residents were interviewed to obtain information related to the year the house and the woodcarvings were built, the influences and functions apart from the details of the house owner, address, and captured ample related photographs. In addition, interviews and analytic reviews were also conducted with professionals consisting of the local woodcarvers and woodcarving experts around Muar.

Data gathered from the site visits were then analyzed with narration and interpretation from these prominent local woodcarvers. Next, the data collected and woodcarving samples were analyzed and discussed with experts for verification. Finally, the timeline table of the houses was done to generate statistical graphs, bar charts, and pie charts to get a typical percentage of statistical analysis review.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

All 50 Johor traditional houses possessed interesting woodcarvings. Analysis, findings, and interpretations of the results are as follows:

Analysis of Findings on Category of Woodcarving Motif

Based on the investigation, all case study houses possessed five categories of motifs: flora, fauna, geometry, calligraphy, and cosmos.

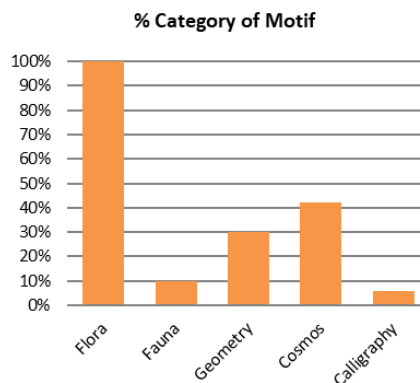


Figure 1: Bar chart showing the percentage of motifs under the category of flora, fauna/animals, geometry, calligraphy, and cosmos

Referring to the bar chart in figure 1, the percentage for motifs found in woodcarvings in the case study showed that the highest category of the motif is the floral motif, which is 100%, where all 50 houses have the floral motif. It is followed by the cosmos motif as the second-largest motif category, namely 42%, and 30% for the geometrical motif. Only 10% of the case study houses have fauna/animal motifs, while only 6% have calligraphic motif.

Interpretation on Category of Woodcarving Motif

All 50 houses were found to have motifs under the floral category of 100%. According to the analysis of site inventory and triangulated with the historical facts and interviews, floral motifs dominated the selection of carvings in all houses because the houses were built after the arrival of Islam to Johor, where after Islam arrived in the early 14th century. The motif preferences have changed from mythical or mystical or animism motifs to floral and geometrical motifs in line with Islamic influences.

Floral motifs dominated the percentage, followed by geometrical motifs because the earliest year of woodcarving in Johor was 1800, after Islam's arrival. According to analysis, geometrical motifs are the second-highest percentage, followed by the calligraphic and cosmos motifs. Due to that, it can be summarized that the motif of flora, geometry, calligraphy, and cosmos are all allowed in Islam since those have no elements of creatures or animals. In contrast, the motif of fauna/animals is the least motif found with the lowest percentage because it is prohibited to be used in Islam.

It can be articulated that the selection of motifs in Johor traditional Malay houses is strongly influenced by the Islamic belief as the construction of houses and all carvings are upon the arrival of Islam to Johor. However, there are also mixed motifs where the floral and geometrical motifs are combined within a pattern, such as at the *jerejak serambi* in figure 2, which also does not violate Islamic belief.

Nevertheless, there is also a fauna/animal motif used in five houses with animal motifs, i.e., motifs of rooster, butterfly, deer, bird, and peacock. Eccentrically, there is a combination of a calligraphic motif together with fauna/animal in one carving on the top of the door (*kepala pintu*), as shown in figure 3 below.

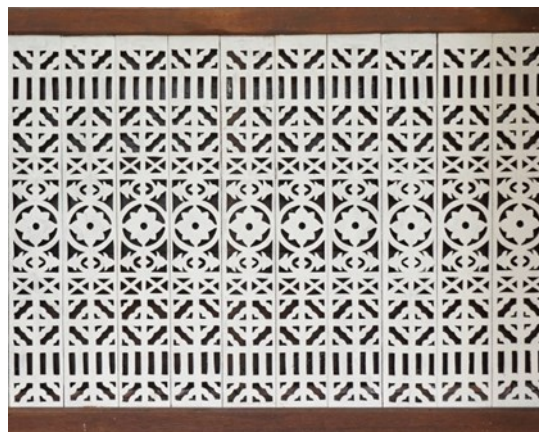


Figure 3: Combination of a calligraphy and fauna motif



Figure 3: Combination of a calligraphy and fauna motif

Figures 4 and 5 show that the flora/animals are used as woodcarving motifs in the case study houses. However, there are only five houses with animal motifs: rooster, butterfly, deer, bird, and peacock.



Figure 4: Woodcarvings with fauna motifs



Figure 5: Woodcarvings with fauna motifs

The findings show that the category of fauna / animal motif is only 10% found in case study houses. It is strictly prohibited in Islamic belief since all study houses were built after the arrival of Islam. However, even though there are fauna/animal motifs, the selection is solely because the selected animal is a good animal, beautiful and has a high status, and is neither a terrible animal nor a mystical or mythical animal.

Findings and Analysis on Pumpkin and Other Floral Motifs

The finding of pumpkin motifs through motif analysis as the highest percentage compared to other motifs makes the pumpkin motif a typical woodcarving motif for Johor. This motif recognition was agreed upon by interviews and discussions with woodcarving experts.

The pumpkin motif preceded the percentage of the analysis statistics at 41%. Besides the pumpkin motif, painted nettle leaf (*daun ati-ati*) motif as much

as 23%, beans chickpea motif and jasmine (*melur*) motif 9%, while other floral motifs of star anise, bamboo shoot, white clover, spanish cherry, pineapple, and turmeric 3%.

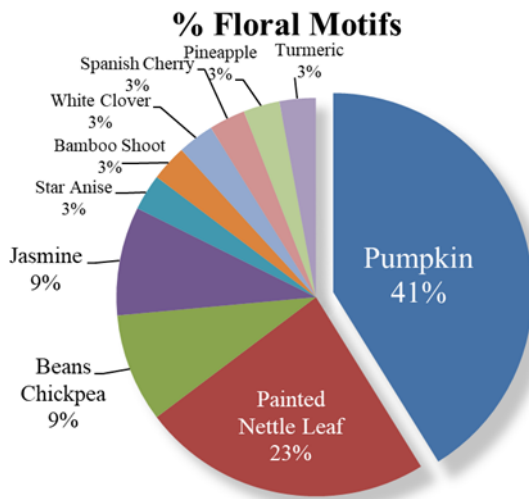
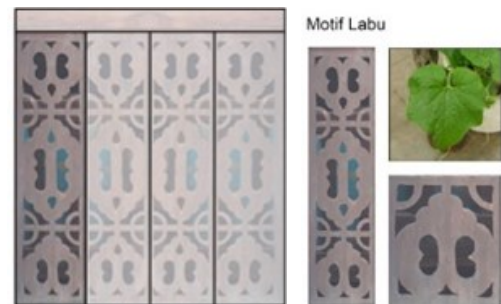


Figure 6: Pie chart showing the percentage of floral motifs

The following is the analysis template for implementing motif recognition methods discussed with woodcarving experts for the verification process.



Perletakan:	Jerejak Tingkap Anjung
Teknik Ukiran:	Tebuk Tembus Tanpa Silat
Komposisi Rekabentuk:	Simetri dan Pengulangan
Pola:	Pemidang
Kategori Motif:	Flora
Motif:	Buah Labu dan Daun Labu
Pendekatan Rekaan:	Transformasi Abstrak
Punca:	Punca Daun
Kod 'S':	Daun Lebar (Kod 'H')
Komponen Ukiran:	Daun dan Buah
Nama Pokok:	Pokok Labu
Nama Botanical:	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i>
Karakteristik:	Tumbuhan herba menjalar
Fungsi:	Masakan dan Perubatan
Khasiat:	Kaya dengan gizi yang lengkap, penghilang dehidrasi tubuh
Kehadiran di Persekitaran:	Bahagian belakang rumah / dapur
Status / Keistimewaan:	Makanan yang melambangkan kemewahan

Figure 7: Pumpkin motif carving analysis



Figure 8: Painted nettle leaf motif carving analysis



Figure 10: Jasmine motif carving analysis



Figure 9: Beans chickpea motif carving analysis



Figure 11: Star anise motif and bamboo shoot carving analysis



Figure 12: White clover motif carving analysis



Figure 14: Pineapple motif carving analysis



Figure 13: Spanish cherry motif carving analysis



Figure 15: Turmeric motif carving analysis

Research Interpretation on Pumpkin Motif

The finding of pumpkin motif as the most carved motif, which is 42%, can be formulated that it is in line with the literature study which states that one of the criteria of a species to be chosen as a motif is due to the nature or uniqueness of the leaves and fruits [13] and belongs to the category that Malay society is interested in such as edible, has medical and aesthetic values [14]. Therefore, pumpkin is included in this special category. Furthermore, through interviews with local carvers and villagers, it was found that most of the Johor Malays eat yams and rice, and if there is a special day, they will serve pumpkin as a luxury food [15].

One of its specialties is because of its deliciousness, on top of the fact that pumpkin has high nutrients which also makes it more special. According to Anas bin Malik r.a who said in the hadith narrated by At-Tirmidzi, one important thing about pumpkin is that the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w was very fond of pumpkins. The era of woodcarving in these case study houses is after the arrival of Islam, and indeed the influence of Islam was also related to the discovery of this most widely used motif. Tuzelan Ahmad [16] also stated that the influence of Johor carving is from the Islamic belief brought by the traders. Hence, religious knowledge becomes a grip in applying motif and sunnah as it is demanded in daily life.

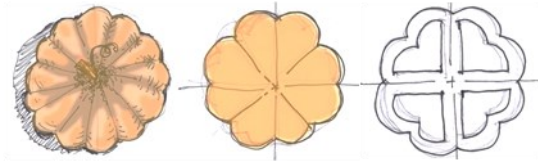


Figure 18: The top view of pumpkin fruit showing the transformation from the actual look of realism image towards an abstract image

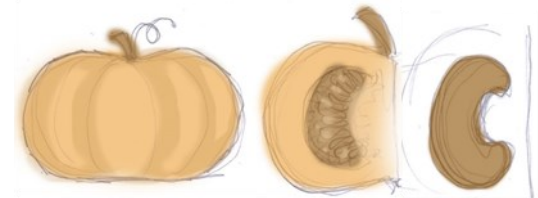


Figure 19: The side view of the pumpkin fruit's exterior, cross-sections, and interior images are sketched towards abstract transformations

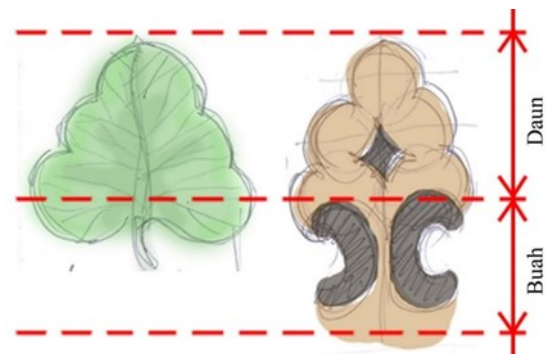


Figure 20: Pumpkin leaves and sketch for carvings using a combination of pumpkin motif through leaves and cross-sections of fruit being carved in an abstract transformation approach

Perletakan:	Jerejak Tingkap Anjung
Teknik Ukiran:	Tebuk Tembus Tanpa Silat
Komposisi Rekabentuk:	Simetri dan Pengulangan
Pola:	Pemidang
Kategori Motif:	Flora
Motif:	Buah Labu dan Daun Labu
Pendekatan Rekaian:	Transformasi Abstrak
Punca:	Punca Daun
Kod 'S':	Daun Lebar (Kod 'H')
Komponen Ukiran:	Daun dan Buah
Nama Pokok:	Pokok Labu
Nama Botanical:	<i>Cucurbita pepo</i>
Karakteristik:	Tumbuhan herba menjalar
Fungsi:	Masakan dan Perubatan
Khasiat:	Kaya dengan gizi yang lengkap, penghilang dehidrasi tubuh
Kehadiran di Persekitaran:	Bahagian belakang rumah / dapur
Status / Keistimewaan:	Makanan yang melambangkan kemewahan

Figure 16: Information on the pumpkin details and its selection as a motif



Figure 17: Pumpkin fruit and its leaves

Since the pumpkin motif is very dominant in the case study houses, it is of interest if given a special term. However, the pumpkin carving is not in realism image approach; instead, it is an abstract transformation approach of a pumpkin, so it has to be distinguished by a different name from the pumpkin motif in the realism image approach that may be carved anywhere else. Thus, this study contributed to discovering and finding the pumpkin motif as 'labu maya', a specially carved pumpkin motif extracted from the fruit exterior, fruit cuttings, and leaves to make it a special motif Johor.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that Islamic influence has major contributions in the decision-making of motif selection in Johor traditional Malay houses. It can be seen through the motif's category and the motifs designed individually in the woodcarvings of the case study houses. Floral motif dominated the percentage for motifs found in woodcarvings which is 100% meaning that all case study houses have the floral motif. It is followed by the cosmos motif as the second-largest motif category, namely 42%, and 30% for a

geometrical motif. According to the analysis of site inventory and triangulated with the historical facts and interviews, floral motifs dominated the selection of carvings in all houses because the houses were built after the arrival of Islam to Johor, where after Islam arrived in the early 14th century. The motif preferences have changed from mythical or mystical or animism motifs to floral and geometrical motifs that are in line with Islamic influences. Religion has always had a big impact on society and the lifestyle of the community. Therefore, religion undoubtedly influences the community's culture, civilization, and beliefs system, including in determining the motifs.

It can be articulated that the selection of motifs in Johor traditional Malay houses is strongly influenced by the Islamic belief as the construction of houses and all carvings are upon the arrival of Islam to Johor. These findings are significant to the local architectural heritage of Johor architecture as it portrays the unity of the local people since 1820. All case study houses have it, and it is important to promote the local identity and sustain the local belongings without imitating the identities of other countries. It is hoped that the findings will help to acknowledge Johor woodcarving's unique identity, to be used for future generations. In addition, the results can also provide valuable guides for woodcarvers to apply these motif typologies into their future works to sustain and cherish the Johor identity. Therefore, the local identity and the authentic value of the local heritage can be preserved.

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